



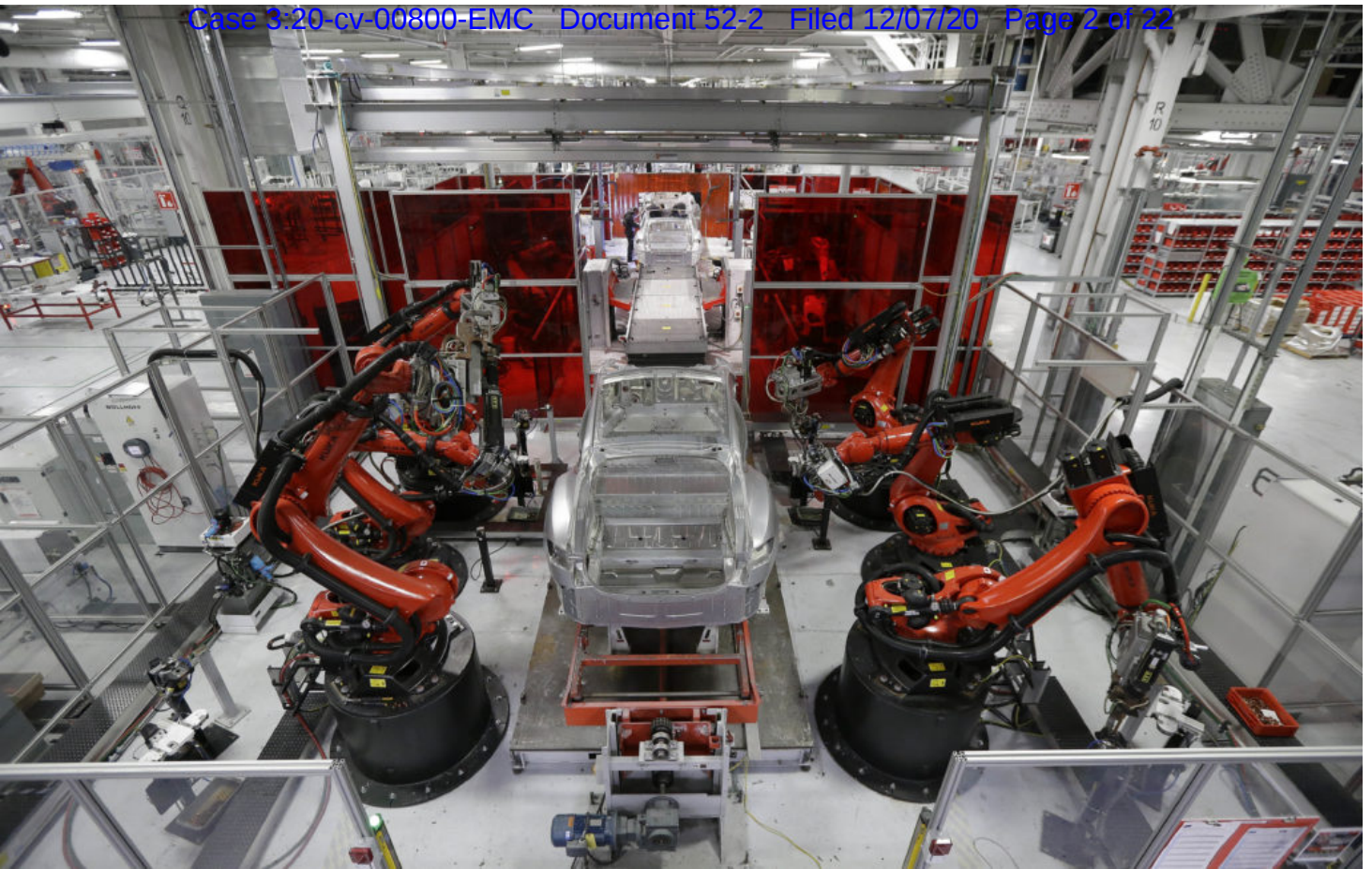
Tesla says its factory is safer. But it left injuries off the books

By [Will Evans](https://revealnews.org/author/willevans) (<https://revealnews.org/author/willevans>) and [Alyssa Jeong Perry](https://revealnews.org/author/alyssa-jeong-perry) (<https://revealnews.org/author/alyssa-jeong-perry>) / April 16, 2018

Inside Tesla's electric car factory, giant red robots – some named for X-Men characters – heave car parts in the air, while workers wearing black toils on aluminum car bodies. Forklifts and tuggers zip by on gray-painted floors, differentiated from pedestrian walkways by another shade of gray.

There's one color, though, that some of Tesla's former safety experts wanted to see more of: yellow – the traditional hue of caution used to mark hazards.

Concerned about bone-crunching collisions and the lack of clearly marked pedestrian lanes at the Fremont, California, plant, the general assembly line's then-lead safety professional went to her boss, who she said told her, "Elon does not like the color yellow."



Robots work on Model S cars in Tesla's factory in Fremont, Calif., in 2015. One color that some of Tesla's former safety experts wanted to see more of is yellow, the traditional hue of caution used to mark hazards.

CREDIT: JEFF CHIU/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The melding of cutting-edge technology and world-saving vision is Tesla Inc.'s big draw. Many, including Justine White, the safety lead, went to work there inspired by Elon Musk, a CEO with star power and now a groundbreaking rocket (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/shortcuts/2018/feb/07/forget-the-car-in-space-why-elon-musks-reusable-rockets-are-more-than-a-publicity-stunt>) in space.

What she and some of her colleagues found, they said, was a chaotic factory floor where style and speed trumped safety. Musk's name often was invoked to justify shortcuts and shoot down concerns, they said.

Under fire for mounting injuries, Tesla recently touted a sharp drop (<https://www.tesla.com/blog/becoming-safest-car-factory-world>) in its injury rate for 2017, which it says came down to meet the auto industry average of about 6.2 injuries per 100 workers.

But things are not always as they seem at Tesla. An investigation (<https://www.revealnews.org/article/tesla-says-its-factory-is-safer-but-it-left-injuries-off-the-books>) by Reveal (<http://revealnews.org/>) from The

Center for Investigative Reporting found that Tesla has failed to report some of its serious injuries on legally mandated reports, making the company's injury numbers look better than they actually are.

Tesla employee injury rates

State and federal law requires most companies to make annual reports of all work injuries. Companies must record every work-related injury or illness that results in time off, work restrictions or medical treatment beyond first aid. "Serious injuries" are defined as those requiring days off work or job restrictions. The rates are based on a calculation of injuries per 100 workers.

	2015	2016	2017
Tesla total injury rate	8.8	8.1*	6.2
Automobile industry total injury rate	6.7	6.2	Not yet available
Tesla serious injury rate	7.9	7.3*	5.2
Automobile industry serious injury rate	3.9	4	Not yet available

*Amended rate

Sources: Reveal analysis of Tesla Inc. injury reports and U.S. Department of Labor data.

CREDIT: GABRIEL HONGSDUSIT/REVEAL

Last April, Tarik Logan suffered debilitating headaches from the fumes of a toxic glue he had to use at the plant. He texted his mom: "I'm n hella pain foreal something ain't right."

The searing pain became so unbearable he couldn't work, and it plagued him for weeks.

IN COLLABORATION WITH

KQED

But Logan's inhalation injury, as it was diagnosed, never made it onto the official injury logs that state and federal law requires companies to keep. Neither did reports from other factory workers of sprains, strains and repetitive stress injuries from piecing together Tesla's sleek cars.

Instead, company officials labeled the injuries personal medical issues or minor incidents requiring only first aid, according to internal company records obtained by Reveal.

Undercounting injuries is one symptom of a more fundamental problem at Tesla: The company has put its manufacturing of electric cars above safety concerns, according to five former members of its environment, health and safety team who left the company last year. That, they said, has put workers unnecessarily in harm's way.

At one point, White said she warned superiors about a potential explosion hazard but was told they would defer to production managers because fixing the problem would require stopping the production line.

We've been telling stories that change laws and lives for more than 40 years. And we're just getting started.

Sign up for our newsletter.

Email Address

SUBMIT

From September 2016 to January 2017, White oversaw safety for thousands of workers on Tesla's general assembly line, in charge of responding to injuries, reviewing injury records, teaching safety classes and assessing the factory for hazards.

"Everything took a back seat to production," White said. "It's just a matter of time before somebody gets killed."

Tesla, worth about \$50 billion, employs more than 10,000 workers at its Fremont factory. Alongside the company's remarkable rise, workers have been sliced by machinery, crushed by forklifts, burned in electrical explosions and sprayed with molten metal. Tesla recorded 722 injuries (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4419499-Tesla-300A-2017.html>) last year, about two a day. The rate of serious injuries, requiring time off or a work restriction, was 30 percent worse than the previous year's industry average.

Frantic growth, constant changes and lax rules, combined with a CEO whom senior managers were afraid to cross, created an atmosphere in which few dared to stand up for worker safety, the former environment, health and safety team members told Reveal.

And in addition to yellow, Musk was said to dislike too many signs in the factory and the warning beeps forklifts make when backing up, former team members said. His preferences, they said, were well known and led to cutting back on those standard safety signals.

"If someone said, 'Elon doesn't like something,' you were concerned because you could lose your job," said Susan Rigmaiden, former environmental compliance manager.

A few months into her job, White became so alarmed that she wrote (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4419515-Justine-Email-to-HR.html>) to a human resources manager that "the risk of injury is too high. People are getting hurt every day and near-hit incidents where people are getting almost crushed or hit by cars is unacceptable."

The next day, she emailed (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4416595-Justine-White-Email-to-Sam-Teller.html>). Sam Teller, Musk's chief of staff, that safety team leaders were failing to address the hazards.

“I know what can keep a person up all night regarding safety,” she wrote. “I must tell you that I can’t sleep here at Tesla.”

She said she never heard back from Musk’s office. She transferred departments and quit a couple months later, disillusioned.

In her March 2017 resignation letter, (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4437759-Resignation-Letter-Excerpt.html>), White recounted the time she told her boss, Seth Woody, “that the plant layout was extremely dangerous to pedestrians.” Woody, head of the safety team, told her “that Elon didn’t want signs, anything yellow (like caution tape) or to wear safety shoes in the plant” and acknowledged it “was a mess,” she wrote.

She sent the letter directly to Musk and the head of human resources at the time – to no response, she said. Woody did not respond to inquiries.



Tesla quality inspector Dennis Cruz has had a series of injuries that took him off the production line. At one point, living on workers’ compensation payments because of work-induced tendinitis, he ended up living in his car, unable to afford rent.

CREDIT: EMILY HARGER FOR REVEAL

Tesla officials dismissed all of White’s concerns as unsubstantiated. They insisted that the company records injuries accurately and cares deeply about the safety of its workers. As proof, company officials said a recent

“Tesla is committed to my health, safety and well-being.”

Before publication of this story, a Tesla spokesman sent a statement (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4432415-Tesla-Statement.html>) accusing Reveal of being a tool in an ongoing unionization drive and portraying “a completely false picture of Tesla and what it is actually like to work here.”

“In our view, what they portray as investigative journalism is in fact an ideologically motivated attack by an extremist organization working directly with union supporters to create a calculated disinformation campaign against Tesla,” the statement said.

Tesla’s spokesman also sent photos of rails and posts in the factory that were painted yellow.

Reveal interviewed more than three dozen current and former employees and managers and reviewed hundreds of pages of documents. Some of the workers who spoke to Reveal have supported the unionization effort, while many others – including safety professionals – had no involvement.

A chaotic factory floor

On one hand, Tesla boasts state-of-the-art machinery that makes it “like working for Iron Man,” as one former employee described it. On the other, the company relied on hoists that weren’t engineered or inspected before they were used to lift heavy car parts, according to a former safety team member, resulting in repeated accidents.

At Tesla's electric car factory in Fremont, Calif., CEO Elon Musk's name often was invoked to justify shortcuts and shoot down safety concerns, former safety experts for the company say.

CREDIT: PAUL SAKUMA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The company is under immense pressure to ramp up manufacturing of the new Model 3 sedan, its first mass-market vehicle at \$35,000. Musk initially said Tesla would be producing 20,000 of them per month (<https://mashable.com/2017/10/03/tesla-model-3-production-woes-analysis/#KH37hHQFemqw>) by the end of 2017 but the company just missed (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/innovations/wp/2018/04/03/tesla-misses-model-3-production-goal-once-again/?utm_term=.6679155b2d34). its scaled-back promise to produce half that number.

Tesla is often in a state of frenzied production. Former employees said they faced 12-hour workdays, faulty equipment and paltry training as they scrambled to come up with workarounds on the fly to get cars out the door.

The hustle meant that health and safety protocols could literally get left in the dust. Last year, construction workers cut through concrete to build the new Model 3 assembly line, spreading silica dust – which can cause

former members of the health and safety team said.

Despite the high stakes for life and limb, the safety professionals maintain safety training has been woefully inadequate. The company said all workers receive at least four days of training. But new employees often were pulled out of training early to fill spots on the factory floor, White and another former safety team member said.

Team members were reluctant to speak to reporters, but said they agreed to in order to help improve conditions for current and future Tesla workers. Some asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals or hurting their careers.

In an interview, Tesla Chief People Officer Gaby Toledano, who joined the company in May, repeatedly questioned the motives of the former health and safety professionals and suggested they might have been “failing at their own job.”

Toledano touted the hiring in October of Laurie Shelby as Tesla’s first vice president for environment, health and safety as an improvement in itself.

“Anybody who walks through our doors into this factory is our responsibility, and we care about them,” said Shelby, formerly safety vice president at aluminum manufacturer Alcoa. “I have a passion for safety and it’s about caring.”

Tesla disputed each of Reveal’s findings. The company said that it had no information that workers were exposed to silica dust and that it does regular air monitoring. It said that while some hoists did fail and injure workers, it was not due to a lack of engineering or inspections, and they have been improved.

Tesla officials Laurie Shelby (left) and Gaby Toledano read the concerns of then-safety lead Justine White, who emailed CEO Elon Musk's chief of staff in 2016. "I know what can keep a person up at night regarding safety," she wrote. "I must tell you that I can't sleep here at Tesla." Tesla says her concerns were unsubstantiated.

CREDIT: PAUL KURODA FOR REVEAL

Toledano and Shelby said they had never heard of Musk's purported aesthetic preferences and pointed out that the factory does have some yellow. Both distanced themselves from what might have happened before their tenure.

Not all injured workers have given up on Tesla, either. Dennis Cruz has had his share of injuries, yet he still wants to get back to the production line.

At one point, out on workers' compensation because of work-induced tendinitis, Cruz ended up living in his car, unable to afford rent. Then, in late 2016, a toxic (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4436216-SDS-BM4601.html>) adhesive many workers complain about got in his eye, damaging his cornea. And in September, as a quality inspector, Cruz says he put out a fire that broke out on a car body, inhaling fumes from burning chemicals.

Cruz, 42, is on light duty as he struggles with shortness of breath, coughing spells and headaches. But he wants to provide for his family, apply his skills and get promoted.

“I can’t do that on workers’ comp. I can’t do that away from the factory,” he said. “That’s why I push to go back. I push to go back into the fire.”

Discrepancies in injury counts

In Tesla’s internal injury tracking system, a supervisor wrote that a worker couldn’t come to work one day in February 2017 because “his left arm was in pain from installing Wiper motors during his shift.” One worker “fainted and hit head on floor” because “team member was working in a group setting and became uncomfortably hot.” Another employee, a supervisor noted, was “highly relied upon at this workstation” but injured her shoulder from repetitive motion due to an “Unfriendly Ergonomic Process.”

Tesla is required by law to report every work-related injury that results in days away from work, job restrictions or medical treatment beyond first aid. But those injuries were labeled “personal medical” cases, meaning work had nothing to do with them. So they weren’t counted when Tesla tallied its injuries on legally mandated reports.

New Tesla employees learn how to use tools safely in a training session at the Fremont, Calif., factory. State safety regulators have cited Tesla eight times since 2013 for deficient training, including twice in the last year.

CREDIT: PAUL KURODA FOR REVEAL

The list of the uncounted goes on. One worker had back spasms when reaching for boxes, one sprained her back carrying something to a work table and one got a pinch in his back from bending over to apply sealer and couldn't walk off the pain.

By law, if something at work contributed to an injury – even if work wasn't the only cause – the injury must be counted (https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/14300_5.html).

A former Tesla safety professional, however, said the company systematically undercounted injuries by mislabeling them.

“I saw injuries on there like broken bones and lacerations that they were saying were not recordable” as injuries, said the safety professional, who asked to remain anonymous. “I saw a lot of stuff that was like, ‘Wow, this is crazy.’ ”

Reveal compared records from Tesla's internal tracking system, obtained from a source, with the official logs, which were requested by an employee and provided to Reveal.

For a dozen examples provided to the company by Reveal, Tesla stood by its decision to not count them. It said workers may have thought they were injured because of their jobs, and supervisors may have assumed the same. But later, Tesla said, a medical professional – sometimes contracted or affiliated with the company – determined there was no connection to work.

“I feel very strongly,” Shelby said. “We are doing proper recordkeeping here at Tesla.”

Reveal also provided Tesla's internal descriptions of the injuries, along with the company's case-by-case response, to Doug Parker, executive director of Worksafe, an Oakland-based organization that previously analyzed (http://worksafe.typepad.com/files/worksafe_tesla5_24.pdf). Tesla's official injury logs.

“The examples you've given me are concerning, troubling,” he said. “They suggest that Tesla isn't reporting all the workplace injuries that they should be reporting.”

LATEST EPISODE

(<https://revealnews.org/episodes/tesla-and-beyond-hidden-problems-of-silicon-valley/>).

Tesla and beyond: Hidden problems of Silicon Valley
(<https://revealnews.org/episodes/tesla-and-beyond-hidden-problems-of-silicon-valley/>)

We investigate companies that are struggling to solve some old-fashioned problems:
Worker safety at Tesla, and diversity at Google and beyond.

► LISTEN **All Episodes (<https://revealnews.org/episodes/>)**

California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health has cited Tesla for more than 40 violations since 2013. Tesla's rate of serious injuries that required time off or job restrictions was 83 percent higher (http://worksafe.org/file_download/inline/83a169a1-2af7-4c2e-81a5-21b6965ff996) than the industry in 2016. Since then, however, Tesla says it has turned things around on its way to "becoming the safest car factory in the world" (<https://www.tesla.com/blog/becoming-safest-car-factory-world>)."

Last year, Musk claimed in a staffwide email (<https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/24/elon-musk-addresses-working-condition-claims-in-tesla-staff-wide-email/>) and at a shareholder meeting (<https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/06/06/elon-musk-says-tesla-is-on-its-way-to-lowering-employees-injury-rate/>) that the company's injury rate was much better than the industry average. A company blog post (<https://www.tesla.com/blog/creating-the-safest-car-factory-in-the-world>) said that to be average would be "to go backwards."

Then Tesla apparently did hit reverse.

"Our 2017 data showed that we are at industry average, so we're happy about that," Shelby said, explaining the earlier claims as a "snapshot in time."

Musk also emailed (<https://electrek.co/2017/06/02/elon-musk-tesla-injury-factory/>) his staff last year saying he was meeting weekly with the safety team and "would like to meet every injured person as soon as they are well, so that I can understand from them exactly what we need to do to make it better."

Toledano said Musk did meet with some injured workers, but no longer meets weekly with the safety team because it isn't necessary.

"Now I can't claim he's met with every injured worker," she said. "I think that's absurd."

Several former members of the environment, health and safety team said they had other reasons to doubt Tesla's official numbers.

The company, for example, didn't always count injuries among the plant's temporary workers, they said. Tesla fills some of its factory positions with temp workers who later may be offered permanent jobs. Companies must count those injuries if they supervise the temps, as Tesla does.

"That's the law," agreed Tesla's Shelby. "Based on my review of our data, we've always done that."

Laurie Shelby, Tesla's vice president for environment, health and safety, points to the principles of her department listed on a placard at the car plant in Fremont, Calif.

CREDIT: PAUL KURODA FOR REVEAL

At one point, though, White said she asked her supervisor why the injury rate seemed off, and he told her they weren't counting temp worker injuries.

"They knew they were reporting incorrect numbers," White said. "Those workers were being injured on the floor and that wasn't being captured, and they knew that."

Tesla began to fix that problem in 2017, former employees said, but it's unclear how consistently.

After workers requested the company's injury logs last year, Tesla amended (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4419502-Tesla-300A-2016-Amended.html>) its original (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4419503-Tesla-300A-2016-initial.html>) 2016 report to add 135 injuries that hadn't been counted previously. The company said it changed the numbers after it discovered injuries that hadn't been shared with Tesla by its temp agencies.

Toxic workplace chemicals

In April 2017, Tarik Logan – a temporary worker – was assigned to patch parts in Tesla's battery packs with Henkel Loctite AA H3500. The powerful adhesive includes toxic chemicals (<https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-09/documents/methyl-methacrylate.pdf>) that can cause allergic reactions and even genetic defects (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4433392-LoctiteH3500-SDS-1808799.html>). Logan and a former co-worker said they went through more than 100 tubes of the glue a day without adequate ventilation or protection from the fumes.

First it brought dizziness, then headaches – the worst pain he's ever felt, Logan said.

"He's a strong person," said Toni Porter, his mother. "For him to cry out, it was terrifying."

Tesla referred Logan, then 23, to a medical clinic that diagnosed an "acute reaction to car adhesive glue causing headaches, dizziness, and some respiratory discomfort." The doctor gave him prescription-strength painkillers and told him to avoid the glue.

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

My head still hurts!!!, he texted Porter. This shit hurts!!!!!!

These texts are among those sent by Tarik Logan to his mother, Toni Porter, while Logan worked at the Tesla factory in Fremont, California in April 2017.

He missed work and ended up at the hospital multiple times, Logan and Porter said. Then Tesla declined to take him on as a permanent employee, citing attendance issues.

Tesla, in response to Reveal's inquiries, said it doesn't agree with the doctor's determination that Logan's pain was work-related. In any case, Tesla said, it doesn't count as an injury because it didn't require any medical treatment.

By law, however, just the prescription of pain medication – documented in medical records obtained by Reveal – requires (<https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2007-02-06-1>) that his injury be counted.

Logan handled only a very small amount of the chemical and exposure levels were within standards, Tesla stated. The company also said Logan didn't complain about headaches until he told a doctor a month later.

That statement is contradicted by medical records and internal company records, which show that Logan's supervisor put it in Tesla's injury tracking system and Logan was diagnosed by a doctor a week after his headaches started.

The former safety team member who asked to remain anonymous said Tesla told workers that their reactions to workplace chemicals were personal medical problems instead of treating them.

“We have employees at work that don’t know what they’re being exposed to, and nobody’s taking care of them,” the safety professional said. “It’s heartbreaking.”

Mark Eberley, 48, was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome in 2014. He injured his hand welding thousands of studs to car wheelhouses during nearly 12-hour days at Tesla.

CREDIT: EMILY HARGER FOR REVEAL

One worker is described in internal records as having gone to Tesla’s nurse “expressing concerns with the fumes in the area. Saying he feels like he is dying.” It was marked a personal medical issue, with a note that stated, “Beyond my skillset.”

Shelby, the safety vice president, said Tesla checks thoroughly for chemical exposures and “nowhere are we over any of the exposure limits.”

This year, regulators cited (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4390644-Inspection-1268303-Citations-Copy.html>) the company for failing to “effectively assess the workplace” for chemical hazards, which Tesla is appealing.

‘Thrown to the wolves’

If Tesla has been improving, it wasn’t fast enough for Alaa Alkhafagi, who joined Tesla in 2017 as an engineering technician servicing robots that spray paint on car bodies. Alkhafagi said he received no safety instruction

specific to the paint department.

Last fall, Alkhafagi, 27, said he was told to go underneath the painting booth to clear excess paint from a clogged hose.

Unsure of how to get down there, workers would pry up a piece of the metal flooring and jump in, he said. When he did, Alkhafagi's foot got stuck in paint, his hand slipped and he fell forward, smashing (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4436269-Alkhafagi-Injury.html>), his head and arm. He ended up unable to make a fist or go back to his job, filing a workers' compensation claim, he said.

The incident didn't end up on Tesla's official injury logs. The company said it wasn't recorded because Alkhafagi initially received only first aid. But his inability to go back to his normal work duties would mean that the injury should have been counted.

"It's more than the accident," Alkhafagi said. "They haven't trained anyone properly."

Tesla said that after his injury, the company made sure only specially trained workers did that job.

Lack of adequate training was a problem throughout the factory, said Roger Croney, who oversaw workers in three different departments.

New employees with no factory experience were sent to Tesla's die-casting operation – where aluminum is melted and molded into parts – without basic training specific to the job, said Croney, former associate manager in that department. Some didn't know they'd be working with 1,200-degree molten metal.

It was far different from the General Motors plant in Ohio where Croney had worked for eight years, he said. So Croney took it upon himself to develop his own training program. A blast of liquid metal had burned his face and hands not long after he came to Tesla in 2012, and he took safety seriously. But other supervisors didn't, Croney said.

Roger Croney oversaw workers in three different departments at Tesla. He took it upon himself to develop his own training program for new employees, whom he said were sometimes sent to work with no factory experience or basic training specific to the job.

CREDIT: AJ MAST FOR REVEAL

“A lot of workers come in and they get thrown to the wolves,” he said.

Croney quit in March 2017 with a letter (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4432391-Roger-Croney-Resignation-Letter.html>) alleging a pattern of discriminatory treatment. Croney, who is black, said he was passed over repeatedly by white people with less experience and then demoted to a supervisor.

In a statement, Tesla said Croney didn’t mention racial discrimination in his letter or exit interview. Croney has a pending claim of racial discrimination at Tesla with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

State safety regulators have cited Tesla eight times since 2013 for deficient training, including twice in the last year, according to a Reveal review of records.

Tesla defended its training regimen, saying all new production employees get a day of orientation, a day of classroom instruction and two days of hands-on training in which they’re shown how to hold and use tools while

avoiding injury. Workers building the Model 3 get an additional two days of virtual training on computers.

“Four days is pretty intensive,” Toledano said, “and then there’s ongoing training, so training is central.”

Repetitive stress injuries

Acknowledging that repetitive stress injuries are the most common way workers get hurt there, Tesla officials emphasize ergonomic improvements to the new Model 3 assembly line.

“We actually redesigned it so it’s safer for our employees to make,” Shelby said. “It’s super cool to see when it’s on the line how much easier it is to make the Model 3.”

Tesla, however, wouldn’t let reporters see that assembly line.

Inside Tesla’s electric car factory in Fremont, Calif., the company is under immense pressure to ramp up production of the new Model 3 sedan, its first mass-market vehicle at \$35,000.

CREDIT: ANDREJ SOKOLOV/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

When building Tesla’s other cars, former workers said they had to sacrifice their bodies to save time. Some workers, for example, lifted heavy car seats over their shoulders because the mechanical assists designed to ease the load were too slow, said Joel Barraza, a former production associate.

“People would carry a seat because they’d be like, ‘Oh, I gotta get this done.’ I personally carried a seat,” Barraza said. “They’re supposed to move. Move it on, move it on, keep the line going.”

White, the former safety lead, also said workers sometimes lifted seats manually, but Tesla, in a statement, said it doesn’t happen.

Barraza said he was fired along with hundreds of other workers last fall. Tesla said employees were terminated en masse (<https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/10/13/4819750/>) due to performance issues, though some workers have argued they were cost-cutting layoffs (<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/17/tesla-firings-former-and-current-employees-allege-layoffs.html>) or used to punish union supporters (<http://www.autonews.com/article/20171026/OEM01/171029793/tesla-uaw-labor-dispute-california>).

Mark Eberley shows his scar from surgery after carpal tunnel syndrome left him unable to continue work at the Tesla factory in Fremont, California. He has been out of work for years.

CREDIT: EMILY HARGER FOR REVEAL

Barraza said he and others hurt their backs through repetitive movements, but few complained because “supervisors would be like, ‘Oh, he’s just being a little bitch.’ ”

Workers' accounts from 2017 didn't sound much different from those who were injured years earlier. In 2014, Mark Eberley was diagnosed with Tesla-induced carpal tunnel syndrome. He wrecked his hand welding thousands of studs to car wheelhouses during nearly 12-hour days, he said. He needed surgery and was out of work and on workers' compensation for years.

"No matter what we were doing, it was hustle, hustle, hustle," he said. "If you didn't get your numbers, they'd be complaining to you."

The pressure could be crushing for white-collar workers as well.

At his office job at the Fremont factory, senior analyst Ali Khan prepared Tesla's financial filings required by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. In 2016, the office was understaffed, and he worked at least 12 hours every day, he said – no weekends, holidays or days off at all.

The pain from repetitive motion started in his wrists, radiated up his arms, then to his neck and back. He said he would have trouble holding a glass of water and couldn't play with his 1-year-old daughter.

Khan said he asked for an ergonomic evaluation, but Tesla's safety team told his manager they were too busy.

"My boss is telling me, 'Oh, if you are going to take time off, it's going to slow us down, it's going to affect your reviews,' " he said.

Tesla eventually sent him to one of its preferred health clinics. A doctor there diagnosed him with work-related muscle strains and tendinitis, repeatedly prescribing painkillers and work restrictions, medical records show (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4433386-Khan-Medical-Records.html>).

That meant Khan had to be listed on Tesla's injury logs. He wasn't.

Khan said he still wasn't allowed the doctor-ordered breaks. Forfeiting lucrative stock options, he submitted his resignation in August 2016. But his body hasn't recovered.

"These things were preventable – that's what makes me upset," he said. "All of this could have been addressed, and it just wasn't."

Everyone should have access to the facts.

Yes, I want to help!
(https://checkout.fundjournalism.org/memberform?org_id=cir&amount=12&installmentPeriod=monthly&campaign=7011Y000001bFca&them)

This story was edited by Ziva Branstetter and Amy Pyle and copy edited by Nadia Wynter and Nikki Frick.

Will Evans can be reached at wevans@revealnews.org (<mailto:wevans@revealnews.org>), and Alyssa Jeong Perry can be reached at alyssaperry@kqed.org (<mailto:alyssaperry@kqed.org>). Follow them on Twitter: [@willCIR](https://twitter.com/willCIR) (<https://twitter.com/willCIR>) and [@alyssajperry](https://twitter.com/alyssajperry) (<https://twitter.com/alyssajperry?lang=en>).

REPUBLIC THIS CONTENT

Related



Musk claims Tesla's safety record is better than average, despite data



Tesla hit by government investigation after Reveal story



Tesla belatedly adds injuries to its books, but it might not face penalties

[About Us](https://revealnews.org/about-us/) (<https://revealnews.org/about-us/>)

[Contact Us](https://revealnews.org/about-us/contact-us/) (<https://revealnews.org/about-us/contact-us/>)

[Pitch to Reveal](https://www.revealnews.org/pitching-reveal/) (<https://www.revealnews.org/pitching-reveal/>)

[Brand Assets](https://revealnews.org/about-us/brand-assets/) (<https://revealnews.org/about-us/brand-assets/>)

[Corrections](https://www.revealnews.org/corrections/) (<https://www.revealnews.org/corrections/>)

[Terms of Use](https://revealnews.org/terms-of-use/) (<https://revealnews.org/terms-of-use/>)

[Privacy Policy](https://revealnews.org/privacy-policy/) (<https://revealnews.org/privacy-policy/>)

[Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsReveal) (<https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsReveal>)

[Twitter](https://twitter.com/reveal) (<https://twitter.com/reveal>)

[Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/revealnews/) (<https://www.instagram.com/revealnews/>)

[YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/reveal) (<https://www.youtube.com/reveal>)

[Newsletter](https://revealnews.org/newsletter/) (<https://revealnews.org/newsletter/>)

[Where to Hear Reveal](https://revealnews.org/where-to-hear-reveal/) (<https://revealnews.org/where-to-hear-reveal/>)

[iTunes](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/reveal/id886009669) (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/reveal/id886009669>)

[Audio RSS](http://feeds.revealradio.org/revealpodcast) (<http://feeds.revealradio.org/revealpodcast>)

[RSS](http://www.revealnews.org/feed/) (<http://www.revealnews.org/feed/>)

[Inside the Newsroom](https://www.revealnews.org/topic/inside-the-newsroom/) (<https://www.revealnews.org/topic/inside-the-newsroom/>)

[Press Releases](https://www.revealnews.org/press/) (<https://www.revealnews.org/press/>)

REVEAL
FROM THE CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

1400 65th St., Suite 200
Emeryville, CA 94608
510-809-3160 | info@revealnews.org
([mailto:](mailto:info@revealnews.org))

© Copyright 2020, The Center for
Investigative Reporting